

Indiana House of Representatives

News and Information

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MONROE COUNTY LAWMAKERS SEEK RETURN TO ORDERLY, OBJECTIVE TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

BLOOMINGTON – Area lawmakers today called on the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) to return to an orderly process to determine long-range transportation priorities for Monroe County and the state, and abandon a proposed plan that has generated confusion and caused fears that future infrastructure improvements will be based on political considerations.

The concerns expressed by State Reps. Peggy Welch and Matt Pierce (both D-Bloomington) and State Sen. Vi Simpson (D-Ellettsville) come in the wake of INDOT Commissioner Thomas Sharp's announcement that the agency would adopt a new 10-year highway improvement plan, effective April 2006. To prepare for the plan, Sharp set a July 1 deadline for legislators and other officials to rank road improvement priorities in their areas.

Simpson, Welch and Pierce said INDOT's sudden request for new rankings of highway projects is generating confusion and concern among local transportation planners. For nearly two decades, INDOT worked closely with local officials in metropolitan and regional planning organizations to develop long-range plans that were reviewed annually. The legislators said they are concerned the long-term efforts of local planning organizations will be wasted.

"INDOT has abandoned an orderly planning process that relied upon structured input from local planning organizations based on objective analysis and replaced it with a new approach that is less thorough and opens the door to politics overriding good planning," Welch said.

Local governments have relied upon INDOT's long-range plan to make decisions about their own local road projects. Officials are concerned that changes in that plan could ruin their own transportation planning.

After meeting with Monroe County highway and planning staff, the legislators learned INDOT already has dropped several area projects from the consideration list. They also learned that many criteria used to rank projects in the current long-range plan have been abandoned under the new process.

The missing projects are:

- Widening State Road 46 from Ellettsville to Spencer to four lanes.
- Widening State Road 45 west from Garrison Chapel Road to Curry Pike to four lanes.
- Adding turn lanes on State Road 45 east from Russell Road to Bethel Lane.
- Widening State Road 46 east from State Road 446 to Friendship Road to four lanes.

INDOT has asked for projects to be evaluated based on economic development, motorist safety and mobility. Previous evaluations also gauged a project's impact on an area's environment, quality of life and existing road conditions.

The legislators found it hard to understand why INDOT felt the need to abandon the current long-term planning process rather than making needed adjustments during annual reviews.

"Everyone involved in the planning process understands how quickly a project gets completed depends on both its priority ranking and how much money is available for construction," Simpson said. "I can't understand why INDOT has suddenly hit the panic button when every past administration has dealt with the problem of more transportation needs than the budget could support."

Pierce added, "An unfortunate pattern is developing with the Daniels administration whether it be INDOT, BMV or Workforce Development. Rather than seeking a consensus on the best way to solve a problem, we again see a state agency charging down a new path before bothering to consult with those most affected by its decisions."

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